



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1982 Volume II: Autobiography

The I in You

Curriculum Unit 82.02.05
by Kathleen O' Neil

Introduction

The study of the autobiography can be an enjoyable and creative way to meet many of the academic needs of our students, as well as aiding them in their quest for self knowledge and self fulfillment.

Few subjects lend themselves more easily to interdisciplinary teaching than does the study of the autobiography. There will be many activities that could be used by teachers other than language arts teachers, however, this unit is specifically designed for the 6th, 7th and 8th language arts teacher of the middle school.

The lessons have been constructed so that they could reach a variety of reading levels among students. Their main objective is to be motivating for not only the high achiever but the low achiever also. Granted, results will vary, yet each and every student will have the opportunity to make an "I" statement and learn to appreciate those of others.

It is for the reason of reaching as many students as possible that many of the procedures and assignments are oral, group discussion, lecture-demonstration, and non-written statements.

Written assignments are geared for student responses to very familiar experiences and things in their life. These assignments will be quite progressive . . . from answering one question about a very definite fact in their life to more culminating and introspective statements.

Objectives

It is important to clarify the objectives of this unit because the topic it discusses is one that is a personal statement. As teachers, we are always asked to "grade" or evaluate the work of our students. We are asked to judge students behavior, work habit, cleanliness, etc. I suggest that for this unit, we put away our red pencils.

The objective for this unit is for students to read, write, discuss and appreciate the autobiographical writings and statements of themselves and others.

Grades, if indeed you feel there must be, may be limited to assignment completed or incompleting. Corrections have no place in this unit, because the assignments make them inappropriate. Suggestions on ways to make a

statement in a different way or to experiment with varying kinds of statements can and should be in order, for students should learn that any autobiographical episode could have many alternatives in its expression.

Therefore, if there is an overriding objective for this unit; it is for the student *and* the teacher to *enjoy* the sharing and self expression that autobiographical studies offer us.

This unit is designed as a year long project. At the end of the unit students are expected to have completed the following:

1. Readings and recitations will have been discussed individually, in small groups and as a class, that present varying autobiographical statements dealing with five major areas in a student's life:
 - A. The "I"
 - B. The parent
 - C. The home or world.
 - D. The school or schooling.
 - E Dreams . . . now and in the future.
2. Non-written autobiographical statements will be shared in small groups and with the class as a whole:
 - A. Students will choose an object within their lives they believe tells something about them.
 - B. Students will make or design two things that make a statement about themselves.
 - C. Students will discuss the above objects both within small groups and the class as a whole.
 - D. Students will arrange their non-written statements in an end-of-the-year "I" Fair.
3. Written autobiographical statements dealing with the above five areas.
4. A student journal.
5. A student evaluation sheet on autobiography presented in this unit.
6. The reading of the book: *Anne Frank : Diary of a Young Girl* . (optional)

Strategies

In order for students to accomplish the above assignments autobiography must be presented as more than a definition. In this unit autobiography will be presented in its broadest sense. Students will progress from very comfortable assignments to those that will demand more understanding of themselves and others.

Autobiography offers endless answers to man's oldest questions: Where am I? Who am I? Who are you? These questions are very much a part of the middle school student. He will be led to realize that since he was old enough to hold up three fingers when asked, "How old are you?" or respond with his name when asked, "What is your name?" he has participated in telling his autobiography. For autobiography is simply a person's telling about himself.

Is the student who shares his photo album with a new friend not being autobiographical? Is telling a new friend all about himself less autobiographical because it's spoken and not written? Is making a collage of all the things you wish less revealing because it is seen and not read?

Once students begin to answer the above questions, autobiography becomes something more familiar and less frightening. They begin to become more interested because they have enjoyed doing all those things and because of that would not mind venturing a little further, even if the teacher finally identifies all of the above as autobiographical.

Therefore, it is the strategy of this unit to present autobiography as a living skill which is used everyday of our life and then offer students the opportunity to see autobiography in its written form as a way in which others, and possibly themselves, have found a rewarding method in expressing the "I" within them.

Introductory Lesson to the Autobiography

Objective to introduce autobiography as a familiar form of communicating information about one's self.

Preparation Bring five different items to the classroom: 1) a chewed pencil 2) a soiled shirt 3) a picture of a self portrait 4) an old textbook 5) a personalized tee-shirt that has been worn.

Student needs Students should be given a list of needs for the entire unit which would be: pencils, pen, and two notebooks.

Procedure Students should be aware that during this unit they will be working in small groups and in the class as a whole. At this time small groups should be arranged and set for the duration of the year.

Small group responsibilities should be outlined. Each small group is to elect a leader and recorder. The responsibility of the leader is to remind the group of its assigned task and the recorder is to keep notes in the group's notebook, as well as report to the class as a whole the findings of the group.

In this introductory lesson the teacher tells the class that before they break up into their individual groups they are to listen carefully to the task they must accomplish.

Teacher discussion The teacher will present class with a "easy" task for their first group assignment. They are to take the article they are given and be detectives as best they can. Each group is to examine and discuss the article and report to the class what the person who owned

each article could be like. Students are then given the article for 15 minutes. At the end of that time student group recorders will stand, display or read the article and give the group's findings. Once each report has been given, the teacher will then elicit from the class as a whole any additional insights or disagreements that might be had.

Assignment The teacher will then tell the students that they are to choose an item or thing that they think tells a lot about them. They are to bring that item or thing to the next class. During that class they are to be prepared to tell their small group how that item says something about them. Students will then name and describe that item in their journal and write at least five things this item tells about them.

Teacher Follow-Up Once students have completed their assignments, the teacher should identify the process they have experienced as autobiographical. In the first assignment, they learned about another person and in the second they attempted to tell someone about themselves. In addition, the teacher should emphasize that students do this kind of communicating everyday and that autobiographical statements are as varied as people. These statements can also be made in many ways as the students self chosen items will demonstrate.

After each student has talked about their chosen item, the class as a whole should categorize all the items. For example, each item should be written on the blackboard. Once the list is complete, students should be able to put each item into a main group. If a child brought in a pet . . . then that would go under living things . . . or if they brought in a painting they have done . . . it should go under things a person does or makes, etc.

Eventually, students should realize that they may make an "I" statement in many different ways.

Closure to the lesson The above lesson may take three or four classes to accomplish. At the end of the lesson students should be able to identify various methods through which people make "I" statements. All of these methods should be seen by students as familiar things and ways of expressing himself. Autobiography is simply something about themselves. They will write and illustrate one "I" statement. For example, "The I in me loves rainbows." or "The I in me gets frightened in the dark."

Using the same format as the previous lesson, the teacher will then continue reinforcing the idea that autobiography is "I" statement that can be made in many ways. For example, as a follow-up lesson, students can be presented with five items that have been made: a song, a statue, a drawing, a painting, and a poem. After following the above procedure students can be given a project of asking their "I" statement in whatever medium they desire. These projects will be presented to the class and then kept for the "I" Fair.

Through this process the students will eventually be exposed to one written autobiography. They will be expected to use their same investigative abilities in analyzing and learning about the writer of the autobiographical episode as they did in their investigation of items and things.

In this part of the unit, teacher questions and assignments are crucial. These questions and assignments will be the guide through which students begin to unlock the richness and diversity of autobiography as a literary form and eventually as a means of their own self expression.

It will be the purpose of this next section to expose students to many different autobiographical statements that deal with very similar topics. There is not a need for the student to know that we have five particular topics in store for them, it is only for them to realize that as each topic is presented to them through various

autobiographical writings that each writer has spoken to the topic in their own way and in their own voice.

These autobiographical episodes should also be presented to the student in a way in which they are very familiar. For example, if the topic is “school” say to the students that they wouldn’t believe how Malcolm X thought about school . . . or do you know when Anne Frank was in school she had to do a punish assigncent because she talked to much. Let me read it to you.

Everyone loves a good story, middle school students are no exception. That is simply what autobiography is . . . a good story. It is our job to present those episodes that we think our students will consider a good story also.

The following will be a sample lesson that will begin students on their way to investigating the written form of autobiography. Excerpts referred to in the “Hand-outs” will be presented in full within the lesson.

Lesson Introducing the “I” tonic to the Class.

Objectives

1. Students will become familiar with different autobiographical writings that describe the author’s perception of himself.
2. Students will identify differences found in the autobiographical episodes.
3. Students will write their autobiographical response to the question the other writers dealt with.

Preparation Have “hand-outs” ready for each student in class: excerpts from Anne Frank, Frederick Douglass Franklin, Maya Angelou and Richard Wright. In addition, have assignment shoes ready to be handed out for each student.

Procedure Students will begin lesson in a large group. The teacher is to present to the class the first reading. This reading will be the excerpt from Anne Frank : Diary of a Young Girl. After teacher discussion of Anne Frank, students will receive copies of the other excerpts with an assignment discussion sheet.

Students will then, in small groups, discuss the questions on the assignment sheet. Each excerpt will have an assignment sheet to be completed.

This lesson may take three to four classes to complete.

Teacher Discussion Today, we are going to hear about a young girl named Anne Frank. Anne Frank was a girl who lived during World War II. During this time, Anne was in hiding because she was a Jew. Jews were in great danger because Hitler had swore he would destroy every Jew. Because of this, Anne, spent two years of her life, between 13 and 15 in an attic with her family and some other people. She had only one friend . . . her diary. In that diary Anne wrote about herself and her life. We all know now that that kind of writing is autobiographical. Let’s look at this writing while I read it to you.

Read the excerpt from Anne Frank : Diary of a Young Girl .

Assignment I would now like you to go into your small groups. Under “Anne Frank” on your assignment sheet you will find a list of questions, together discuss and answer each of them. Recorders you should be prepared to give your group’s findings to the class. You will have 20 minutes to discuss and fill out the section under “Anne Frank.”

Teacher Follow-Up As students reread the excerpt and begin discussing the assignment sheet, the teacher should sit in on each group for at least 5 minutes of their discussion. The teacher should facilitate and direct where a group may need help. This can be done through asking questions or making observations.

Hand-out #1 Excerpt from Anne Frank : *Diary of a Young Girl* .

Saturday, 20 June, 1942

Dear Kitty,

. . . I haven’t written for a few days, because first of all to I wanted to think about my diary. It’s not only because I have never done so before, but because it seems to me that neither I—nor for that matter anyone else—will be interested in . . . a thirteen-year-old girl. Still, what does that matter? I want to write. But more than that, I want to bring out all kinds of things that lie buried deep in my heart. . . .

I don’t intend to show this cardboard-covered notebook, bearing the proud name of ‘diary’ to anyone, unless I find a real friend. boy or girl. Probably nobody cares. And now I come to the root of the matter, the reason for starting a diary. It is that I have no such friend. ¹

Hand-Out #2 Student Discussion Sheet—Anne Frank section.

1. Choose your favorite sentence or two from this writing of Anne Frank. Write it on the lines below.
2. Write down the reasons why Anne Frank was writing in her diary.
3. Write 10 words that you think describe the girl Anne Frank.
4. What do you think these things are that “lie deep in” Anne’s heart?
5. As a group, what would you tell Anne Frank if you were able to write her a letter. *Recorder* : Write down the group’s responses and be prepared to share it with the class.

Closure to Anne Frank section of the lessons. Each student recorder should report to the class as a whole on the group letter. Teacher should ask different students to read their answers to questions 1-4.

Having completed the introduction of the excerpt of Anne Frank and its discussion, the teacher should be prepared to present other excerpts that deal with similar statements of intention and descriptions of the “I” in

autobiography.

Since this format will be used for each of the five areas you will be asking the following questions of your students:

1. How does Anne Frank begin her autobiography Why?
How did other begin theirs? Why?
How would you begin yours? Why?
2. What did you learn about the “I” in Anne Frank?
What did you learn about the others’ “I”
What could you say about the “I” in you?
3. What does Anne Frank tell us about her parents? How?
What do others tell us about their parents? How?
What would you say about your parents?
4. How does Anne Frank describe her home . . . her world.
How do others?
How would you?
5. What was school to Anne Frank?
What was it to others?
What is it to you?
6. What are Anne Frank’s dreams?
What have been others’ dreams?
What are yours?

Using Anne Frank: Diary of a Young Girl, will be the jumping off point for each section covered in this unit.

Therefore, by following the lessons, each area can be taught by using an excerpt from Anne Frank and subsequent excerpts from other appropriate autobiographies. In this lesson plan, I have chosen several excerpts from other autobiographies that are short but still conveying much of the “I” of the writer. Following are the excerpts and their section on the Student Discussion Sheet.

Hand-out #3 Excerpt from Benjamin Franklin

Having emerged from the poverty and obscurity in which I was born and bred, to a state of affluence and some degree of reputation in the world, and having gone so far through life with a considerable share of felicity, the conducting means I made use of, which with the blessing of God so well succeeded, my posterity may like to know, as they may find some of them suitable to their own situations, and therefore fit to be imitated. ²

1. Define: obscurity, bred, affluence, reputation, felicity and conducting.
2. Why has Benjamin Franklin written his autobiography?
3. Who can learn from his autobiography?
Use the word he uses.
4. Where did Franklin come from?
Where does he say he is now?
5. Does Franklin believe someone really would like to read about him? Did Anne Frank? Guess which book is the most read. Why?

Hand-out #4 Excerpt from Malcolm X

I believe that it would be almost impossible to find anywhere in America a black man who has lived further down in the mud of human society than I have; or a black man who has been any more ignorant than I have been; or a black man who has suffered any more anguish during his life than I have. ³

1. In one sentence tell me what Malcolm X is saying.
2. Why did Malcolm X write his autobiography?

Hand-out #5 Excerpt from Richard Wright

The white South said that it knew ‘niggers’ and I was what the white South called a ‘nigger.’ Well, the white South had never known me— ⁴

1. Richard Wright has been called “nigger” . . . have you ever been called a name? What name? Did you feel different from Richard Wright? The same?
2. Why does Richard Wright write his autobiography?
3. Choose one word to describe how Richard Wright feels. Why?

Hand-out #6 Excerpt from Maya Angelou

Wouldn't they be surprised when one day I woke up out of my black ugly dream, and my real hair, which was long and blond, would take the place of the kinky mass that Momma wouldn't let me straighten . . . Because I was really white and because a cruel fairy stepmother who was understandably jealous of my beauty, had turned me into a too-big Negro girl, with nappy black hair, broad feet and a space between her teeth that would hold a number-two pencil. ⁵

1. What words does Maya Angelou use to describe her imaginary self? Her real self?
2. How does she feel about herself?
3. After reading this excerpt, how do you feel about Maya Angelou.

Hand-out #7 Excerpt from Frederick Douglass

'Learning would spoil the best nigger in the world. Now,' said he, ' if you teach that nigger (speaking of myself) how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave.' . . . These words sank deep into my heart, . . . From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom. ⁶

In the previous lesson using various excerpts, students dealt with relatively simple questions within their groups and individually. Once the students have read these excerpts and gained insight from their classmates and themselves, it is up to the teacher to lead them to identifying the writers' similarities and differences. For example, in these writings that have been quoted, each writer expresses the same sense of uniqueness and aloneness, yet in their own way, each writer is reaching out for acceptance and recognition.

In the following lesson, the student is now ready to accomplish a writing assignment. As has been stated previously, the objective of this unit was for students to read, write, discuss and appreciate the autobiographical writings and statement of others and themselves.

Lesson on the “I” in You.

Objectives

1. Students will make an “I” statement.
2. Students will begin their journal.

Preparation Teacher will have copies of hand-outs 1-8. Copies of the books from which the excerpts were taken.

Student needs Notebook, pencil, and hand-outs 1-8.

Procedures Today, I would like to show the books that these excerpts were taken from. All of them have a picture of the person who wrote the book. Up to this point we have been much like detectives, guessing about a particular person from very few clues.

Take each book, show the student the picture of the author and briefly recount the author's life and fate. Point out where students had come very close in their descriptions of the person.

Illustrate how different each person was in age, background and personality.

Ask students, which book did they think they would like to read. Why?

Finally, ask each student which person they felt very much like. Why? If none . . . why?

Assignment Each student is to write a statement that would tell someone why they would write an autobiography. Encourage students to deal with what makes them different yet very much a part of mankind.

Students are to write this opening statement in their notebook that they have designated to be their journal. Within this statement they should be able to express at least one statement that determines them to be unique and different from anyone else. Refer again to the excerpts read.

In addition, students should ask themselves the question, "Why have so many people like Anne Frank and Frederick Douglass written an autobiography?" They should begin to determine as Anne Frank says, that sometimes in our lives there just are not those people around us that we can share our most inner thoughts and desires with. The autobiography becomes for many a "friend," a companion who listens well, and understands.

Through the lessons presented I have tried to show how the goals presented in the beginning of the unit can be achieved. In addition, I have tried to lay down a format that could be used to achieve these goals. Obviously, I would have liked to have given a lesson for each of these goals, but it is my hope that you can carry on from here with those pieces of autobiography you feel are relevant to your students.

The lessons in this unit deal with: the parent, the home, the school and dreams because they are so frequently described in autobiographies. Also, they are things that are very familiar to the student. The student deals with each of them often in their young lives.

I have tried to make the lessons included in this unit as self contained as possible in order to entice you into giving autobiography a try. Once you begin to explore this subject matter with your students the possibilities for self expression become endless. Students respond to these works and, hopefully, "The I in You," will too.

Notes

1. Anne Frank, *Anne Franks The Diary of a Young Girl* (New York: Pocket Books, 1958) p. 2.
2. Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1970), p. 6.
3. Malcolm X, *Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Grove Press, 1966), p. 379.
4. Richard Wright, *Black Boy* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1966), p. 283.
5. Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (New York: Bantam Books, 1973), p. 2.
6. Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass an American Slave* (New York: The New American Library, Inc., 1968) p. 119.

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